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ABSTRACT

A study examined the roles of reading in a community by describing the reading activities of individuals and demographic subgroups of individuals. After the preliminary, trial phase to determine the feasibility of the survey, 109 adult wage earners from 4 occupation groups, in a community of 6,000 households, responded to an inventory designed to elicit and record reading activities. Analysis of data showed that the median amount of time individuals spent reading brief documents, newspapers, books, and magazines per day at home and at work was 157.5 minutes (about 2.6 hours). Women read more than men (about 186 minutes per day compared to about 114 minutes per day), and individuals with an education beyond high school read more than those with a high school diploma or less. Findings also showed that reading plays different roles for individuals in different occupation groups, that the time devoted to content areas varies by occupation, and that media categories of newspapers, books, and magazines were read in distinctive patterns by different occupation groups. In the surveyed community, the greatest volume of reading was directed toward reading brief documents, followed by materials on news and business, social issues, reference, fiction, and sports. References and tables of findings are included. (EL)

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Reading Competencies and Practices

Profiles of Reading Activity in a Community

John Guthrie and Mary Seifert

October 1982

Technical Report #4

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Profiles of Reading Activity

Authors from a variety of countries have recently placed reading in a revealing historical perspective. John Oxenham (1980) from England, and Harvey Graff (1982) from the U.S.A., among many others, have sketched the profile of literacy against the backdrop of human emergence from cave to metropolis.

In his Presidential Address to the International Reading Association in May 1982, Ken Goodman recalled some of these triumphs in a celebration of literacy. As he pointed out, reading has made history possible. By recording their actions, we have been able to know our ancestors. In primitive societies crude accounts were kept of transactions with traders. Scratches on scrolls gave such immense advantages that they evolved into the business communications of today. Reading gave birth to the most prevalent form of art--literature. Novels and poems are enjoyed intrinsically. From printing presses have sprung newspapers making political awareness nearly universal in advanced countries. We have instant knowledge of earthquake or honor on any part of the globe.

Beyond these benefits Oxenham (1980) contends that reading endows us with a "technology of the intellect." Reading enables the human intelligence to interact with itself. This supreme accomplishment enables human reason to become more reasonable, a business account to become more accountable, and science to grow more scientific. Through reading we create the environment that shapes our minds and selves.

Reading Achievement versus Action

In school programs that relate to reading, a premium is usually placed on achievement. Skills and abilities are improved as rapidly as possible. Standardized reading tests, criterion referenced measures, and curriculum unit assessments usually measure these achievements.

A certain achievement implies that a student has the capability for understanding certain types of material. The student has potential for learning. But these achievements do not imply action. A high score on a test or a high measure of reading ability neither guarantee nor prevent the student from engaging in reading activities that will lead to knowledge, self-awareness, or respite from daily tensions. Although most educators honestly assume and fervently hope that achievement will lead to good ends, the real point of teaching is action. Merely to endow students with a potential that is never realized would be a profound error.

Reading achievement may be understood as a means for obtaining valued benefits such as the acquisition of knowledge, aesthetic experience, and economic gain. As the fruits of achievement these activities are vital. A person who can read with some facility is likely to be informed of a new event or opportunity, sustained in an old belief, guided to an otherwise impossible feat, relieved of tension, or transformed with a new self-perception. These effects of reading result from action, that is, selecting written information and addressing attention to it. The reader is met by messages, alarms, enticements, or novel events. These encounters are actions performed by the reader, and consistently performed actions pertain to a person's system of values and beliefs.

Prevalent Reading Activities of Different Educational and Occupational Groups

The purpose of the present study was to examine the roles of reading in a community by describing the reading activities of individuals and demographic subgroups of individuals. The attempt was to capture all of the reading performed by a person regardless of media, content or situation. The study intended to quantify the reading activities of individuals. The study addressed the question: How can the reading actions of people be described? It was expected that since different occupations are associated with social, economic and intellectual life-styles that reading activities would vary across occupational groups.

Method

Reading Activity Inventory

A detailed interview guideline was devised to elicit and record the reading activities of an individual. The first stage in developing the Reading Activity Inventory consisted of preliminary observations. Seven individuals in the community of interest were personally interviewed for 3 to 11 hours. Included were a custodian, editor, postal clerk, secretary, a family of 2 parents and 3 children. Their typical daily activities, favorite reading topics, volume of reading, and satisfactions from occupational or leisure pursuits were obtained. The Reading Activity Inventory is "grounded" in these case studies.

The Inventory is administered in the form of a personal interview. The first step of the interview is to give the following orientation: "This is an inventory of your reading activities. You should think of reading as gaining meaning from written messages. Reading activities should be included if they are the only thing you are doing; they also should be counted if you are reading while you are doing something else, such as eating a meal, resting, working, or traveling. Reading may occur for any length of time, from one minute to one hour or a longer period. We are interested in how much reading you do each month. Include your place of residence or your work, and the non-workdays such as

weekends or holidays. This inventory will cover newspapers, books, magazines, and brief documents."

Newspapers. The second phase of the interview begins with the question, "Do you read a newspaper?" Since the vast majority of individuals reply positively, rapport is developed. The name of the primary newspaper, the language in which it is printed, and number of days on which it is read each month are elicited. The sources including newsstand, mail, friend, work place, library, classroom are recorded. Similar information is obtained for a second, third or fourth newspaper. This phase orients the person to the amount of reading performed within the newspaper medium.

The next stage is to obtain information on the frequency and time of reading different contents in the newspaper. The first item asks for "How often do you read the local news?" Alternative frequencies include daily (the local news is read five or more times per week); often (two to four times per week): weekly (once per week); monthly (one to three times per month); or rarely (less than one time per month).

The time spent reading the local news is obtained by asking the person to estimate about how long he or she spends each time the local news is read. Categories for time are provided including one to four minutes per sitting (1-4), five to nine minutes (5-9), (10-14), (15-29), (30-60), or over 60 minutes.

For newspapers the following categories of information are recorded in terms of frequency and time: local news, national news,

international news, business/economic, health/nutrition, home economics, human interest/prominent people, social problems/education problems, sports/travel, religion, science, recreation (hobbies, games, activities), psychology (self-improvement and behavior), and other.

Continuing with the newspaper, a section on Fiction/viewpoint is included containing: editorials, humor (comics, cartoons, jokes), stories, reviews (books, TV, movies, theatre, arts), and other.

Within the newspaper, Reference information is included in the interview. This consists of: classified ads, announcements (births, deaths, weddings, community activities), TV/radio/movie listings, stock and financial listings, and consumer advertising.

Books. Following the section on the questionnaire, reading in books is examined. An orientation is provided by saying "In this questionnaire reading includes skimming to find information, reading a small item, studying, reading an entire book, following directions, or other ways of gaining meaning. These activities may occur at work, at home, or in different situations." A general estimate of number of days spent with books per month, the languages in which books are read and the sources for obtaining them are elicited.

Frequency and time for reading contents in books are obtained in a format similar to that for newspapers. For instance, the first item is, "Do you read natural science (physics, chemistry, biology, geology)? Is this information read daily (five or more per

week), often (two to four per week), weekly (one per week), monthly (one to three per month), or rarely (less than once a month)?" The next question is, "How much time is spent reading natural science in each of these occasions on the average?" The persons' estimates were placed within the same time categories as newspapers, that is, 1-4 minutes per sitting, 5-9 minutes per sitting, and so on.

The contents included in the questions for information in books consisted of: natural science, social science, psychology, Bible/religion/philosophy, politics/news/law, sports/recreation, home maintenance/improvement, health/hygiene/medicine, history/biography/geography, travel, arts (painting, music, theatre), business/economics/management, agriculture (plants and animals), engineering/construction/electrical, and other.

Also in books, Fiction/viewpoint reading is solicited and includes: literature (novels, stories), humor, drama/poetry, and other.

For books, Reference reading includes directories (dictionary, telephone book), manuals (how-to, repairs, cooking, office procedures), handbooks of information (encyclopedias, catalogs for buying), and other.

Magazines. Reading in magazines was elicited with a procedure similar to that for newspapers and books with content areas that were adapted for magazines, journals, reports, and pamphlets.

Brief Documents. The last phase consists of questions that elicit the reading of Brief Documents. This category includes: bills/invoices, personal letters, newsletters/bulletins, labels or addresses on parcels, notices or signs on billboards, business correspondence, memos/notes, schedules/maps, forms to fill out or read, files or records, legal documents, information for purchase (size, weight, contents), diagram/charts, directions, and other. The frequency and time for reading these brief documents was recorded in a manner identical to that for other media such as newspapers, magazines, and books.

The last phase of the interview consists of gathering background information. The present residence, language, sex, education, occupation, and age was obtained for all respondents.

Sampling

In this study, a community was selected which contained a broad range of educational and occupational characteristics. The 1970 census showed that men comprised 46% and women were 54% of the population. The sample for the study contained 51% men and 49% women, which is comparable. The census showed that 87% of the population had 0-12 years of education; 13% had 13 or more years of education. The sample contained 68% with 0-12 years of schooling, and 34% with 13 or more years, which is generally similar but not strictly comparable and limits generalizations about educational strata.

Occupational characteristics of the sample and community population were similar. The census showed that in Occupation 1 (professionals and managers) 13% of the population was included. Occupation 2 (small-business men, clerical) contained 36% of the population; Occupation 3 (skilled workers, craftsmen) contained 34%; and Occupation 4 (unskilled workers and unemployed) contained 16%. The sample included: Occupation 1, 17%; Occupation 2, 35%; Occupation 3, 29%, Occupation 4, 19%. Similar proportions between the sample and the total do permit generalizations to be made on this factor.

Of 6000 households in the town, a sample of 143 was selected at random to establish a target group. In total 109 usable interviews were obtained after refusals and absenteeism were accounted for.

Administration of the Inventory

The preliminary phase of this study consisted of a trial to determine the feasibility of the survey. Two enumerators who were middle-aged women with previous experience in conducting surveys were recruited. They were given a 4-hour training session, selected addresses in the town, and each of them administered 12 Inventories. Based on their feedback some details in the interview were modified and the survey proceeded.

The full administration of the Reading Activity Inventory began with a training period for the enumerators. They were given

a description of the survey, its purpose, a demonstration of its administration, and a discussion of problems that they raised. These enumerators were middle-aged women who were familiar with the community and were being remunerated a certain amount for each successfully completed Inventory.

Each enumerator was assigned a particular section of the town and given a list of addresses. Publicity was given to notify the community that the survey was taking place, The newspaper ran a notice; the radio station noticed the newspaper article and added an announcement. Area police were alerted to the fact that these women were part of an official program associated with a nearby university.

The enumerators approached each household and interviewed an adult wage earner within. In homes where more than one adult wage earner resided, the enumerator requested to interview the most immediately available individual. Persons not included consisted of students, retired persons, and full-time homemakers.

The completed inventories were returned to staff for coding and keypunching. Some errors of recording and administration were corrected at this point. The final set consisted of 104 completed Inventories.

Analysis of data

The first step in data analysis consisted of combining the frequency information with the amount of time spent in each

sitting. Since "rarely" was used as a euphemism for "never," any person who included this was considered not to have read that content. The number 1 was assigned to "monthly;" the number 4 was assigned to "weekly;" number 12 was assigned to "several days;" and 20 was assigned to "daily." These numbers were multiplied by the number of minutes recorded for each content to obtain the number of minutes per month spent by the respondent reading that content.

For each person the contents within the different media were combined to form a total of 16 variables. These consisted of: newspaper - News and Business, newspaper - Social Issues, newspaper - Sports and Recreation, newspaper - Fiction/viewpoint, newspaper - Reference, book - News and Business, book - Social Issues, book - Sports and Recreation, book - Fiction, book - Reference, magazine - News and Business, magazine - Social Issues, magazine - Sports and Recreation, magazine - Fiction/viewpoint, magazine - Reference, and Brief Documents. These variables were combined to form aggregates for contents and media.

Results

The purpose of this study was to describe the reading activities of different occupation groups in a comprehensive yet qualitative fashion. Therefore, descriptive statistics of several kinds are are presented, but inferential statistics are not reported.

The incidence and volume of reading activities can be compared in Table 1. The percentages of individuals in each occupation group that read each content category are given as incidence. For example, the incidence of reading Brief Documents was 100% (i.e., at least some reading for each person each month) for all occupation groups. However, the total volumes for all contents ranged from a median of 224 to 60 minutes per day for occupation group 1 to 4. The need for reading these materials was universal in the sample, but the volume varied by a factor of 3.7.

Profiles of reading activity were constructed by presenting a figure with one section for each occupation group. Figure 1 contains the following information for each content of each occupation group: mean (middle line of rectangle), mean plus 1 standard error (top line of rectangle), mean minus 1 standard error (bottom line of rectangle) and median (the enclosed box).

The first finding was that the median amount of time spent reading per day by wage earners in this community was 157.5 minutes, which is about 2.6 hours daily. This figure includes reading that was performed at work, in the newspaper, and in books and magazines that serve a wide spectrum of purposes. Men read a median of 114 minutes, or 1.9 hours per day; whereas women read about 186 minutes, or 3.1 hours per day. Education level accounted for a substantial difference in median reading time as individuals with education beyond high school read 217 minutes per day, whereas those with high school or less read 98 minutes per day.

Occupation Groups. At the outset of the study it was expected that reading would play different roles for individuals in different occupation groups, and the time devoted to content areas would vary by occupation. As Figure 1 indicates, this expectation was supported. Occupation 1, the professional and managerial group, is noted for its heavy reading of Brief Documents; 103.5 minutes per day was the median. Next, News and Business was read 32.5 minutes per day, followed by Social Issues at 18.5 and Fiction at 15.0 minutes per day.

Individuals in Occupation 2 which contained semiprofessional, small business, and clerical workers had a different reading pattern. Brief Documents was the highest single category with a median of 50.5 minutes per day, but the mean was 113 with a standard error of 18.8. This difference between the mean and median indicates that some people read Brief Documents at high volume while others read them very little in this occupation group. Second highest volume was Social Issues with a median of 21.5. Reference was read 13.5 minutes per day in the typical case; News and Business, 11.5 minutes per day, and Fiction was 8.5 minutes per day indicating similar volumes for these contents.

Occupation 3 was composed of skilled workers and craftsmen. The highest median was News and Business with 20.2 minutes per day. This group read this content area with nearly twice the volume of the Occupation 2 group, and about two-thirds the

volume of Occupation 1 group. The second highest median for Occupation 3 was Brief Documents at 17.5 minutes per day, but the mean was 66 with a standard error of 16 which indicates a broad variation within this content. Although wide variation is present for Social Issues, Sports, Fiction and Reference had similar volume levels.

Occupation 4 contained unskilled workers and the unemployed. The highest volume was Brief Documents with a median of 14.5 minutes per day. The volumes of Reference (12.5 minutes per day), News and Business (8.5), Social Issues (7.5), Fiction (6.5), and Sports/Recreation (3.0) were relatively similar.

Media Types. Media categories of Newspapers, Books, and Magazines were read in distinctive patterns by the different occupation groups. Newspapers are read for similar volumes by the four occupation groups, from a median of 37 to 40 minutes per day. As Table 2 indicates, Books were read in similar volumes by Occupation Groups 1 and 2, with a decrease for Occupation 3 (skilled workers) and negligible reading in this medium among Occupation 4 (unskilled workers). Magazines were read for 19 minutes by Occupation 1 (professional and managerial); about half that much time (8 minutes per day) was spent by Occupation 2 (small business and clerical workers); again a 50 percent drop to 4 minutes per day was seen for Occupation 3 (skilled workers); and Occupation 4 (unskilled workers) read about the same as skilled workers.

Discussion

As John Oxenham said, "The most important use of literacy, perhaps the most unexpected to those who invented it,...is its function as a technology of the intellect" (p.131). In other words, reading (which is one prevalent dimension of literacy) is a tool of the mind. It is a practical means that we have evolved for supplementing and improving our mental activities. Historical studies have suggested that literacy (which includes reading) has served a variety of roles. However, the contributions of reading in contemporary settings have only recently begun to be explored.

Distinctive patterns of literacy appear in different communities according to investigators using ethnographic methods. Scribner and Cole (1981) reported that being literate in Arabic, English or Vai scripts carried different benefits for members of the Vai community in Liberia. Individuals who knew Vai were leaders of the Vai culture; whereas those who knew English were more cosmopolitan in their interests and knowledge; proficiency in reading Arabic was associated with religious devotion and restricted educational development. Heath (1982) reported that members of one community, Roadville, used reading for staying abreast of news and recording personal and community events. Another community, Tracton, used literacy primarily for

utilitarian roles such as assembling equipment or obtaining specific information from reference materials. These studies suggest that communities have diverse patterns of literacy. This diversity has not been studied systematically and the findings are qualitative. Efforts to describe reading activities quantitatively have emphasized summary statistics and population generalizations rather than exploring the uniqueness of individuals or groups (Sharon, 1973-74; Szalai, 1973; Diehl & Mikulecky, 1980).

In the present study one dimension of the diversity of reading was described. The volumes with which different content domains are read was compared for four (4) occupation groups. The contents of reading activities are the resources to which the technology of intellect has been addressed. Although the contents themselves may suggest purposes for reading, the two are not to be confused. For example, reference manuals are designed for the storage of information and represent a substitute for the human memory that can be searched for specific information. However, reference materials may be deeply studied or thoroughly enjoyed. The uses or purposes for a particular content may vary across individual people and unique times. Despite the importance of this differentiation, some speculation on the functions as well as the contents of these reading activities will be attempted.

In the community that was surveyed the typical person read over 2-1/2 hours per day. The largest volume of reading was

oriented to Brief Documents. Typically 37 minutes per day were spent reading newsletters, business correspondence, billboards, and directions. This form of literacy serves to sustain communication in an urbanized society in which formal organizations dominate and individuals communicate through institutional vehicles.

The second highest volume of content was News and Business which was consumed for 17.8 minutes per day typically. This volume suggests considerable sophisticationin politics and civic affairs, and a substantial awareness of business and economic matters.

Information about Social Issues was read for about 17 minutes per day. This includes human issues such as health, nutrition, and psychology, as well as social problems and educational dilemmas. Artistic and scientific topics were included here as well, although their volumes were low. Reading in this content area shows a curiosity about human development outside the political arena. Self-knowledge, social information and scientific sophistication are likely to be extended through a high volume of reading in this domain.

The fourth highest volume was Reference which was read for 11.3 minutes per day and included the consumption of manuals, directories, and such items as classified advertisements in the newspaper. Reference materials take advantage of the power of

written language for storage and retrieval. Information that is efficiently and permanently housed in print may be searched for a myriad of specific purposes. Data or particular information retrieved in this manner are often used for an immediate task. Reading reference materials serve a utilitarian function. It enables people to do things for their economic, domestic, personal or social benefit.

For the group as a whole, Fiction was read for 7.4 minutes per day. Encompassing literature, fiction, short stories, humor and editorials, these contents were found in books, magazines, and newspapers. A substantial part of this volume of reading serves an aesthetic function in Rosenblatts' (1978) sense of the term. She says, "In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). The experience is the end in itself; with fiction, people temporarily transcend the daily routine.

Finally, Sports and Recreation were read for 4.1 minutes per day. This content is likely to be both informative and instrumental. It promotes reaction directly and vicariously.

Diversity of reading activities in four occupation groups is apparent. For example, as the profiles of Figure 1 reveal, professionals and managers read Brief Documents extensively and also read News and Business more than other groups. Their volume of reading shows an orientation to institutional systems and politics.

Small business workers, semiprofessionals, and clerical workers spent a substantial amount of time (50 minutes per day was typical) reading Brief Documents. However, the range within the group was wide since some individuals read brief documents in high volumes and others in low volumes. Their orientation was toward Social Issues, focusing on topics such as human interest, health, home maintenance, history and education. This group emphasized reading to increase knowledge for self-development and social awareness.

Skilled workers and craftsmen showed a relatively high volume in News and Business. The group median of 20.2 minutes per day exceeded all others. This content was primarily local and national news in newspapers and magazines. The volume of reading Sports/recreation was slightly higher than other groups. Their emphasis, then, was on reading for political awareness and the amusement of sports.

Workers in unskilled occupations read about 60 minutes per day typically. Although this level is lower than other groups, nevertheless, it is a substantial engagement with print for people who may be the least well-prepared for its demands. The highest areas were Brief Documents and Reference which implies an emphasis on institutional engagements and utilitarian benefits. However, the popular image that unskilled workers are nonreaders or are limited to the reading required by employment applications

is contradicted by these findings. News and Business, Social Issues, Fiction, and Sports were also read in moderate volumes. In other words, political awareness, social development, aesthetic experience and amusement were among the functions for reading in this group as well as others.

Education for reading includes assisting students in learning from textbooks, improving the enjoyment of literature, and increasing the skills of using reference materials. Instruction of this kind takes place in several contexts. The classroom is the primary setting; but the classroom is in a community. The human context includes teachers, parents and peers. The volumes of reading, or practices of literacy, which prevail in communities have been shown to be correlated with achievement of students at cross-national (Guthrie, 1981) and national (Greaney, 1980) levels. As this study points out, there are marked variations in reading volume for different occupation categories in a community. Individuals in these groups acquire and extend their reading abilities in distinctive contexts. Schools that primarily serve one of these occupational categories may have distinctive pressures for literacy. Learning about the impacts of these contexts is likely to assist with the improvement of reading education.

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Table 1

Content of reading activities by occupation

		Occupations 1 Professional/ Managerial	2 Small Business/ Clerical	3 Skilled Craftsmen	4 Unskilled Workers	Total
News and Business	md.	32.5	11.5	20.2	8.5	17.8
	(%)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(90)	(98)
Social Issues	md.	18.5	21.5	13.5	7.5	17.0
	(%)	(100)	(97)	(87)	(95)	(94)
Sports/ Recreation	md.	3.5	3.5	6.5	3.0	4.1
	(%)	(83)	(75)	(80)	(75)	(78)
Fiction	md.	15.0	8.5	6.5	6.5	7.4
	(%)	(94)	(92)	(87)	(85)	(89)
Reference	md.	11.0	13.5	9.5	12.5	11.3
	(%)	(100)	(94)	(100)	(100)	(98)
Brief Documents	md.	103.5	50.5	17.5	14.5	37.5
	(%)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)
Total	md.	224.5	173.5	108.5	60	157.5
	(%)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)

Note: md. is median minutes per day.

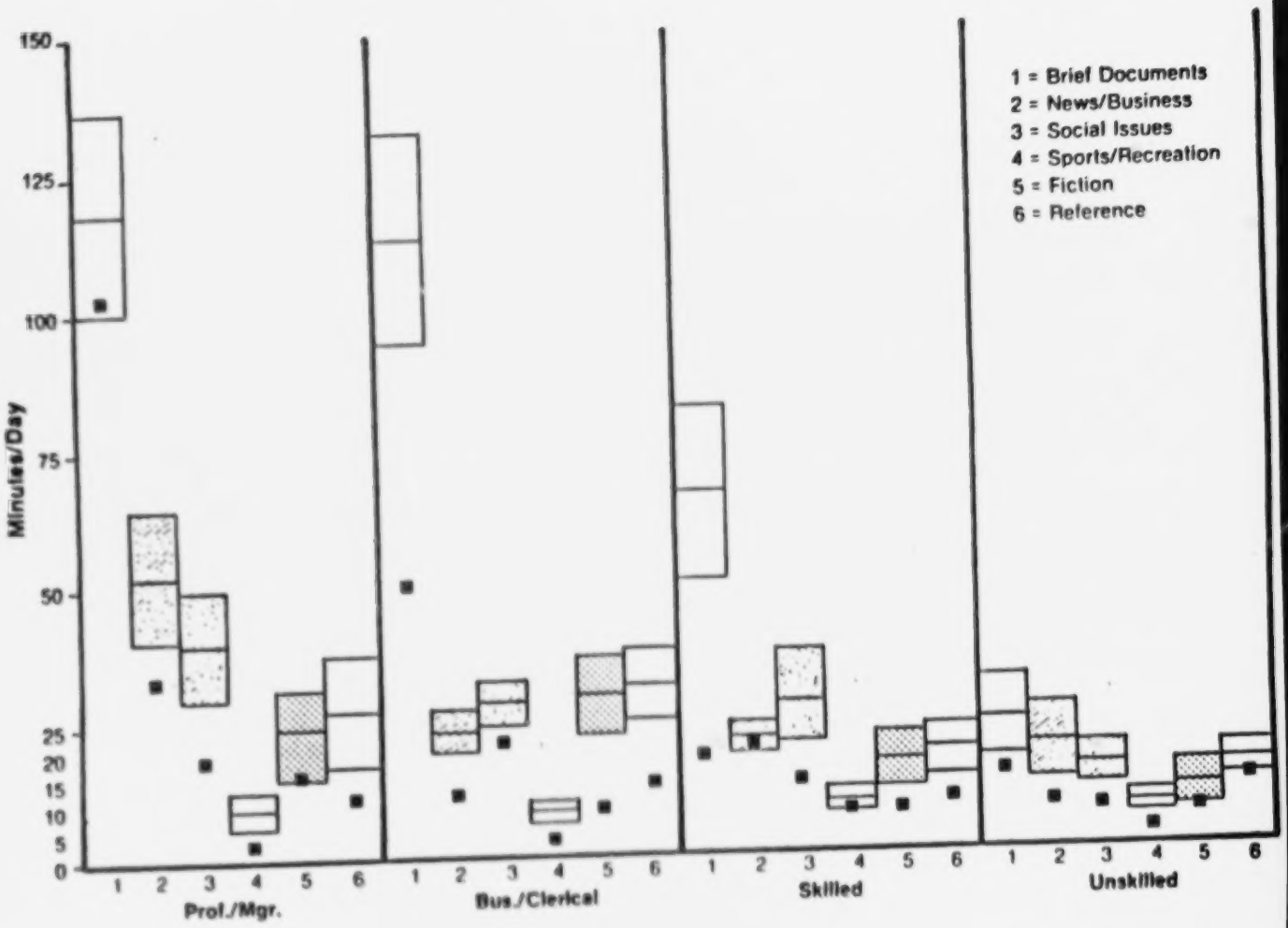
% is percent of persons in occupation group.

Table 2

Readership of media by demographic groups

Occupation Group	Media		
	Newspapers	Books	Magazines
1. Professional/Managerial	40	36	19
2. Small Business/Clerical	39	33	8
3. Skilled Worker	37	24	4
4. Unskilled/Unemployed	37	3	3
Total	39	24	8

Note: Figures are median minutes per day.


150
125
100
75
50
25
20
15
10
5
0
Minutes/Day
1 = Brief Documents
2 = News/Business
3 = Social Issues
4 = Sports/Recreation
5 = Fiction
6 = Reference
1 2 3 4 5 6
Prof./Mgr.
1 2 3 4 5 6
Bus./Clerical
1 2 3 4 5 6
Skilled
1 2 3 4 5 6
Unskilled

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